

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Nobel Diplomacy: The Rhetoric Of The Obama Administration



1. Introduction

When the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded US President Barack Obama the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2009, it declared that Obama had “*created a new climate in international politics*” (Norwegian Nobel Committee 2009).

In his acceptance speech, Obama said, “*my administration has worked to establish a new era of engagement in which all nations must take responsibility for the world we seek*” (Obama 2009). This paper analyzes the National Security Strategy (NSS) released by the Obama administration on May 27, 2010, to evaluate the rhetorical constructs, assumptions, and arguments that define this “*new era of engagement.*”

Since 1986, every US president has been required to present Congress with an annual strategic plan. The NSS issued by Obama in May 2010 is the first strategy statement prepared for Congress during Obama’s presidency. The Obama administration is not unusual in its lax adherence to the law; President George W. Bush released only two national security strategies (in 2002 and 2006) during his administration. The purpose of the national security strategy is “to set administration priorities inside the government and communicate them to Congress, the American people and the world” (DeYoung 2010). The Obama administration also included an introductory letter authored by the president as part of the NSS.

2. The rhetoric of imperial righteousness

The NSS is a crucial rhetorical text of the Obama administration. In it, the president frames the purposes and strategies of American foreign policy. Therefore, it is important to analyze the rhetoric of the NSS. Because the US president is the most significant rhetorical figure in American political discourse, the language that the president uses to characterize foreign policy strongly influences the terms of the debate on American foreign policy (Tulis 1987; Dow 1989; Stuckey 1995; Cole 1996; Zarefsky 2004; Edwards 2009). Edwards and

Valenzano (2007) contend that a president's foreign policy rhetoric "supplies American foreign policy with a distinct direction in international affairs" (p. 303). As Drinan (1972) notes, "Language is not merely the way we express our foreign policy; language is our foreign policy" (p. 279).

Burnette and Kraemer (2007), in their analysis of the war discourse of George W. Bush, identify the rhetorical construct of "imperial righteousness" that characterizes American foreign policy rhetoric. The rhetoric of imperial righteousness is an extension of the rhetoric of "militant decency" described by Friedenbergr (1990). The rhetoric of militant decency, used by early 20th century presidents to justify war, is based on themes of US power, US character, and American assumption of social responsibility (Friedeberg 1990). George W. Bush defined the US role in international conflict as preemptive by adopting a rhetoric of imperial righteousness (Burnette & Kraemer 2007). The rhetoric of imperial righteousness features four themes: national security, the nature of the enemy, democracy and freedom, and American morality (Burnette & Kraemer 2007). This rhetoric is "imperial" because it advances the interests of what many scholars have characterized as American imperialism. Bacevich noted, "Those who chart America's course do so with a clearly defined purpose in mind. That purpose is to preserve and, where feasible and conducive to US interests, to expand an American imperium" (2002, p. 3). This rhetoric also expresses an assumption of American righteousness that is based on several premises. These include the assumptions that the US is motivated by good will, that the US is reluctant to become entangled in international affairs, and that the US wields superior military power. A final assumption is that Americans have a unique role "not simply to discern but to direct history" (Bacevich 2002, p. 33).

This paper examines the arguments in the NSS expressing the four themes of imperial righteousness: national security, the nature of the enemy, democracy and freedom, and American morality. We argue that the rhetorical framework of American imperial righteousness is not unique to the Bush administration but is and will continue to be the definitional framework of American foreign policy.

3. National security

The first theme of imperial righteousness, national security, suffuses the NSS. Obama discussed the domestic and international dimensions of national security. Early in the NSS, Obama made the point that national security is based on

pragmatism rather than ideology. He stated, "To succeed, we must face the world as it is" (Obama 2010b, p. 1). The report and the president's introductory letter also admonished Americans to take a realistic look at their options and strategies. The emphasis on pragmatism and clarity represent an attempt to shift the definition of national security away from ideological objectives.

The NSS posited that in order to strengthen its national security, the United States must be willing to admit mistakes, vulnerabilities, and imperfections. In reviewing American military capabilities, Obama observed that the US had maintained its military advantage but overall American competitiveness had not kept pace. The act of admitting these shortcomings enables Americans to demonstrate their mettle and work toward a more sound and secure future for themselves and for all citizens of the world. The NSS said, "at each juncture that history has called upon us to rise to the occasion, we have advanced our own security, while contributing to the cause of human progress" (Obama 2010b, p. 6). While Obama acknowledged American imperfections, his conclusion was that the US has a unique capacity to advance its interests consistent with imperial righteousness.

According to Obama, national security starts with domestic strength. In his letter, Obama noted, "Our strategy starts by recognizing that our strength and influence abroad begins with the steps we take at home" (2010a). These steps include bolstering the US economy, reducing the national deficit, guaranteeing opportunities for education to all American children, developing clean energy, and pursuing scientific advances. In the area of homeland security specifically, the US must also effectively manage emergencies, empower American communities to resist radicalized terrorists, and strengthen aviation security (Obama 2010b, pp. 18-19).

While domestic strength is crucial, US national security also depends on international engagement. The NSS set the tone early when Obama noted, "The lives of our citizens - their safety and prosperity - are more bound than ever to events beyond our borders" (Obama 2010b, p. 7). This message is significant, and large sections of the report are dedicated to this argument. This concentration on international engagement even affects the notion of homeland security. As the report indicated, "We are now moving beyond traditional distinctions between homeland and national security" (Obama 2010b, p. 10). Even issues that are often construed as domestic ones, such as homeland security, necessitate international

engagement.

The NSS described several strategies the US should follow to implement appropriate and effective international engagement. The US must defeat al-Qa'ida, respond to networks of violent extremism, seek to secure, reduce, or eliminate nuclear weapons, counter biological threats, address climate change, respond to global disease and epidemics (Obama 2010b, p. 11), and do its part to shore up the global economy (Obama 2010b, p. 4). This list reflects the diffuse and varied nature of international initiatives that the US must monitor in the interest of national security. This monitoring also furthers the cause of imperial righteousness.

In dealing with hostile or uncooperative countries, the US must present them with a clear choice between cooperation with and inclusion in the international community or exclusion from the community if a nation violates international norms. Obama cited Iran and North Korea as two examples of countries that face international sanctions because of their behavior. Obama warned, "if they ignore their international obligations, we will pursue multiple means to increase their isolation and bring them into compliance with international nonproliferation norms" (Obama 2010b, p. 24). Obama used Iraq as an example of the converse of this strategy: constructive engagement. He argued that the US must end the war in Iraq by enabling the Iraqis to assume full responsibility for their government. According to Obama, this outcome "will allow America to leverage our engagement abroad on behalf of a world in which individuals enjoy more freedom and opportunity, and nations have incentives to act responsibly, while facing consequences when they do not" (Obama 2010b, p. 2). In this way, the strategy expands imperial righteousness: nations who do not toe the American line will be sanctioned, while those who cooperate with the US will receive the support of the US and its international allies.

One of the premises of imperial righteousness is the historical role that the US has assumed on the world stage. The NSS referred to world events throughout history during which the US has asserted its leadership, such as the US response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. According to the NSS, those attacks "put into sharp focus America's position as the sole global superpower" (Obama 2010b, p. 8). The report also used historical examples when it described American responses to the industrial revolution, the global spread of communism, and the aftermath of World War II. In each case Obama argued that the US demonstrated

global leadership that contributed to greater American security. He noted, "In the past, the United States has thrived when both our nation and our national security policy have adapted to shape change instead of being shaped by it" (Obama 2010b, p. 9). The rhetoric of imperial righteousness presumes that America has the ability and even the responsibility to influence world events rather than merely react to them.

While the US must demonstrate strength, purpose, and agency in influencing world events, Obama also argued that the burdens of global security cannot fall solely on the United States. He explained three reasons that the US must expect and accept the cooperation of other countries in maintaining the global security that will enhance US national security. First, the US must rely on its allies because otherwise the division of labor is inequitable. Second, as we have seen, the list of global initiatives that must be implemented and monitored is too long and varied for one country - even a superpower - to manage effectively. The US cannot police the world by itself. And, finally, if the US attempts to do so, it will put its own security at risk. As Obama explained, "our adversaries would like to see America sap its strength by overextending our power" (Obama 2010a). A lack of international engagement and cooperation will therefore threaten American security.

Obama made it clear that while the US will work with other nations to realize greater international security, it will still retain its military strength. As Burnette and Kraemer (2007) noted, "The rhetoric of imperial righteousness validates the American prerogative to utilize military power in the cause of right" (p. 193). Obama argued in the NSS that the US will seek many opportunities for non-military engagements with other international actors and states, but it will not relinquish its military superiority. Obama stated, "Our military must maintain its conventional superiority, and, as long as nuclear weapons exist, our nuclear deterrent capability" (Obama 2010b, p. 14). There must also be a balance between the need to appear strong and the effective use of military might. While American military strength is a cornerstone of US security, the US must not assume that it will automatically be an appropriate response to many of the challenges facing the world. Finally, the US must guard against having its military prowess used to hurt American interests. Nevertheless, the superiority of American military might, a fundamental precept of imperial righteousness, is beyond dispute.

Finally, the report argued that while the US will maintain its military strength, it will not use this strength to force its values on other countries. Obama observed, "In keeping with the focus on the foundation of our strength and influence, we are promoting universal values abroad by living them at home and will not seek to impose those values through force" (Obama 2010b, p. 5). The NSS thus disclaimed an explicit imposition of imperial righteousness, although the US will still seek to export its values worldwide.

4. The nature of the enemy

The second major theme of the rhetoric of imperial righteousness is the nature of the enemy that the US faces. Edelman (1988) argued that enemies in political rhetoric can "give the political spectacle its power to arouse passions, fears, and hope" in audiences (p. 66). Leaders, particularly during wartime, have capitalized on the rhetorical power of enemies to motivate their citizens. George W. Bush's challenge in creating a rhetorical enemy was that the enemy he defined - terrorism - was an impersonal and multi-faceted phenomenon. Moreover, Bush sought to ensure that the enemy "terrorism" was not conflated with nationalities (such as "Afghans") or religions (such as "Islam"). In this theme Obama departs dramatically from his predecessor. Rather than seeking to personalize an enemy, Obama expands the notion of "enemy" to include impersonal natural and economic forces in addition to groups or individuals. In doing so, Obama dilutes the rhetorical force of the enemy.

Although most rhetors work to personalize an enemy, the NSS enacted the opposite strategy. The report identified both "conventional and asymmetric threats" (Obama 2010b, p. 14) as enemies that the US must face. Particularly when describing the "asymmetric threats," the report constructed an enemy or enemies that are diffuse, systematic, and impersonal. The threats that the US faces include a "far-reaching network of violence and hatred" (Obama 2010a), "violent extremism" (Obama 2010b, p. 3), the spread of nuclear weapons, dangers stemming from our reliance on technology, poverty, inequality, economic insecurity, food insecurity, pandemic disease, oppression, climate change, dependence on fossil fuels, the vulnerability of global financial systems, transnational criminal threats and illicit trafficking networks. From a rhetorical standpoint, it is difficult to arouse fear or passion in response to these impersonal enemies.

While fear appeals are one of the strategies that rhetors often use to generate

emotion and response to the rhetorical construction of an enemy, Obama characterized fear in a different way. In an echo of Franklin Roosevelt, fear is another threat that must be resisted. The NSS discussed fear in order to minimize its effects. Noting that one of the goals of terrorist attacks is to create fear, Obama warned that responding with fear could “undercut our leadership and make us less safe” (2010b, p. 21). Rather than channeling fear, Obama sought to minimize it.

The enemies that have the most personal qualities are al-Qa’ida, violent extremists, and certain nation states. While the NSS named concrete, personified enemies, it did not give them qualities such as agency or emotion. Even in this identification of an enemy that most Americans would be familiar with, the language stressed the impersonal, systemic nature of the threat. The report did not mention specific measures that the US should take to defeat al-Qa’ida. Instead, Obama stated generally that the US would strengthen its own networks, break up terrorist operations as early as possible, and deny terrorists safe havens. The report was very clear in spelling out the importance of due process, accountability, and the prohibition of torture in delivering “swift and sure justice” (Obama 2010b, p. 21). The report also named “violent extremists” both domestic and foreign, as enemies. Again, Obama spent little time on describing the motivations of these extremists or the extent of the danger they pose. The report recommended that, in the case of domestic extremists, Americans could counteract the danger they pose by making families, communities and institutions better informed. The way to meet this enemy is pragmatic and systematic rather than personal. The third enemy that takes a more personal form is states that behave in a way that threatens US national security. Obama noted, “From Latin America to Africa to the Pacific, new and emerging powers hold out opportunities for partnership, even as a handful of states endanger regional and global security by flouting international norms” (Obama 2010b, p. 8). As he did with al-Qa’ida and extremists, Obama dispatched these threatening states quickly and clinically.

5. Democracy and freedom

While the NSS may try to re-shape and re-define strategic initiatives of the US under the Obama Administration one thing remains constant and clear - America will continue to take a strong and vibrant leadership position in advancing freedom and democracy throughout the world. Obama claimed that American leadership has historically succeeded in steering the currents of international

cooperation in the direction of liberty and justice. Indeed, he argued that this advocacy of universal rights “is both fundamental to American leadership and a source of our strength in the world” (Obama 2010a). Staunchly supporting democracy abroad has been a continuing theme for American presidents. George W. Bush noted that the future security of America depends on a commitment to “an historic long-term goal - we seek the end of tyranny in our world” (Bush 2006). Obama continued that quest.

Grounded in American leadership the NSS reaffirmed America’s commitment to pursue its interests within an international system defined by nations’ rights and responsibilities. Obama proposed that America should engage “abroad on behalf of a world in which individuals enjoy more freedom and opportunity, and nations have incentives to act responsibly, while facing consequences when they do not” (Obama 2010b, p. 2). In creating a cooperative venture with other nations in the advancement of liberty Obama issued a subtle ultimatum to the countries of the world - join with us, or choose a separate path that leads to isolation. This ultimatum is bolstered by Obama’s belief that “Nations that respect human rights and democratic values are more successful and stronger partners” (Obama 2010b, p. 5).

America should be a leader in fostering “peaceful democratic movements” and facilitating the “freedom to access information” throughout the world while engaging “nations, institutions, and peoples around the world on the basis of mutual respect” (Obama 2010b, p. 11). In discussing this engagement, the NSS continually employed themes of American leadership and multinational cooperation. Obama believes that the universal aspiration for freedom and dignity must contend with new obstacles and confirms that the United States will take leadership in that pursuit, but America cannot and should not have to do it alone. Therefore, the NSS beckons other nations to follow American leadership in the quest for universal rights. The rhetoric of imperial righteousness extends the idea of empire by creating a community of nations united in the goal of spreading democracy, freedom, and human rights. The US supports countries that support freedom, as defined by America, thus making the world more American.

Obama’s effort to secure a peaceful world through leadership and cooperation can best be described as “enlightened self-interest” (Obama 2010b, p. 3). If other nations enable their citizens to live in freedom and prosperity, Americans will benefit. The Obama administration believes the US can achieve this enlightened

self-interest by engaging other nations. He argued, “Our diplomacy and development capabilities must... strengthen institutions of democratic governance” and promote a just and sustainable international order (Obama 2010b, p. 11). US engagement will succeed because it “advances mutual interests, protects the rights of all, and holds accountable those who refuse to meet their responsibilities” (Obama 2010b, p. 12). This is a veiled threat of isolation. Nations must either engage and promote freedom or be isolated.

One area where the threat is not so veiled is the Middle East. The Middle East provides a clear example of the dichotomy of freedom and engagement (Iraq) versus the threat of isolation (Iran). The United States has important interests in this region including the rebuilding of a secure, democratic Iraq. Obama pledged that the US wants a “sovereign, stable, and self-reliant” Iraq and that the US “will keep our commitments to Iraq’s democratically elected government” (Obama 2010b, p. 25). Conversely, Obama chastised Iran for failing to live up to its international responsibilities and refusing to engage. He described an Iran that can take its “rightful place in the community of nations” and enjoy political freedom for its people (Obama 2010b, p. 26). If Iran refuses, the NSS threatened even “greater isolation” (Obama 2010b, p. 26).

Democracy, not political viewpoint, becomes the basis for US support. As Obama noted, “America respects the right of all peaceful, law-abiding, and non-violent voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them” (Obama 2010b, p. 38). Obama stated that support for democracy is not about candidates, but about the process and the rightful use of the power that comes from the process. Again, Obama cautioned that legitimate, peaceful governments that govern with respect will gain America’s friendship, but governments that use democracy as a means to ruthlessly obtain and wield power will “forfeit the support of the United States” (Obama 2010b, p. 38).

Part of the rationale for the NSS is Obama’s conclusion that “democratic development has stalled in recent years” and “authoritarian rulers have undermined the electoral processes” resulting in impeding free assembly and the right to access information (Obama 2010b, p. 35). Obama again invoked the concept of “enlightened self-interest” by arguing that the US supports the expansion of democracy and human rights because those governments’ “success abroad fosters an environment that supports America’s national interest” (Obama 2010b, p. 37). For Obama, supporting democracy is clearly tied to economic

development. As he said, they are “mutually reinforcing” (Obama 2010b, p. 37). A broadened view of democracy that includes the promotion of economic schemes designed to bring about prosperity is a unique concept to Obama’s NSS. American leadership engages countries to implement sustainable growth that will in turn help the American economy.

Unlike previous presidents, Obama has a much broader view of democracy and freedom. The idea of democracy still comes with a political and moral imperative to act in the cause of right and to champion fledgling governments, but this is now coupled with an incentive to enhance the economies of these nations so that the American economy can grow as well. And while American rhetoric that challenges non-democratic processes or human rights violations will continue, the United States should not and cannot continue to be the only actor on the stage. It is expected that other democratic nations shall also take up the gauntlet of democracy promotion. While the wars in Iraq and on terror were the clear kingpins in Bush’s security strategy, Obama has a more restrained view that seeks to envision a world of the future beyond the battlefields of war where freedom and democracy, in the American image, reign supreme.

The rhetoric of imperial righteousness seeks to create a world-view that promotes democracy and freedom for America’s benefit. When democracy supports economic sustainability, America benefits. When freedom spurs the spread of American values abroad, America benefits. And when the world is made a safer place by becoming more democratic and civil, America benefits. Obama’s criterion of “enlightened self-interest” is able to mask the selfish nature of democracy promotion in the service of imperial righteousness. We argue that Obama uses the concepts of democracy and freedom to philosophically advance the American empire and that the rhetoric is righteous in its skillful advocacy of human rights and human values—values that are at the core of what it means to be American.

6. American morality

Burnette and Kraemer (2007) contend that American morality is a key component of the rhetoric of imperial righteousness. They argue, “the rhetoric . . . suggests that we look to what is good and socially responsible as an obligation of empire” (Burnette & Kraemer 2007, p. 197). In the NSS Obama utilized leadership and multinational involvement to make the case for the advancement of American morality. Moreover, American moral leadership will help guarantee global

security. American moral leadership is crucial because it is through American leadership that the US can advance its own interests in the 21st century. According to the NSS this work begins at home by recognizing that Americans most effectively promote their moral values by living them at home. Obama noted, “America has always been a beacon to the peoples of the world when we ensure that the light of America’s example burns bright” (Obama 2010b, p. 2). Americans promote the values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. According to Obama, the American people can set an example of moral leadership because of their dynamism, drive, and diversity. The idea of supporting the development of universal rights around the world is a key factor in the rhetoric of imperial righteousness. However, the American example does not always stand up to scrutiny and Obama wisely admitted, “America’s influence comes not from perfection, but from our striving to overcome imperfection” (Obama 2010b, p. 36). He described Americans’ ongoing effort to perfect the union as inspirational. The persuasive nature of American morality allows the US to admit its problems but revel in the ability of the American people to rise above those problems.

Obama, like all US presidents, praised the American servicemen and women who demonstrate “their extraordinary service, making great sacrifices in a time of danger” (Obama 2010b, p. 4). According to Obama, the American military is the embodiment of American morality. Specifically, American soldiers put their lives on the line to preserve the American way of life. Obama recognized that by saying that he sees the qualities of service and sacrifice “particularly in our young men and women in uniform who have served tour after tour of duty to defend our nation in harm’s way” (Obama 2010b, p. 52). The power of the American military becomes a clear indication of morality in that the US protects and defends democracy and freedom at home and abroad. Indeed, Obama claimed that America is the “sole global superpower” and with that power comes great responsibility (Obama 2010b, p. 8).

“Enlightened self-interest” is also critical to defining American morality under the Obama version of imperial righteousness. Engagement with other countries bolsters “our commitment to an international order based upon rights and responsibilities” (Obama 2010b, p. 3), according to Obama. But the NSS does not elucidate what rights and responsibilities the American example is supposed to support.

Inherent in any discussion of the rights and responsibilities that shape American morality is the interplay of American values with the broader concepts of democracy and freedom discussed earlier. For example, Obama supported protection of civil liberties and privacy, which is critically linked to democracy and freedom. He also highlighted the rule of law and the US capacity to enforce it, which strengthens American leadership. Finally, Obama said, “the United States has benefitted throughout our history when we have drawn strength from our diversity,” demonstrating that “people from different backgrounds can be united through their commitment to shared values” (Obama 2010b, p. 37). These values become the glue that binds the American people together. Obama described this relationship in his address to cadets at West Point, cited in the NSS, when he said, “our values are not simply words written into parchment. They are a creed that calls us together and that has carried us through the darkest of storms as one nation, as one people” (as cited in Obama 2010b, p. 51).

A final characteristic of American morality is resolve. American self-interest and resolve are strong. The NSS quoted Obama’s Inaugural Address when he said, “We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waiver in its defense,” adding that “our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken – you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you” (as cited in Obama 2010b, p. 17). The NSS also praised American resilience as having always been at the heart of American spirit, creativity, and invention. As the world changes, new and different actions need to be utilized to solve complex problems. Obama posited that Americans are up to that challenge. Throughout the NSS, Obama’s language portrayed the American character positively. Obama described Americans as, among other things, disciplined, determined, hardened by wars, inspired, dynamic, driven, and diverse. Americans find opportunities, fight injustice, support international efforts, underwrite global security, engage others, and support just peace. Finally, Americans’ leadership and ingenuity enable them to adapt to the sweeping changes of globalization.

The discussion of American morality under the Obama administration does not veer far from the vision that previous presidents have articulated. Obama argued that the core of American morality is inherently just. The US leads by example to promote universal rights and freedoms at home and America stands as a rightful steward and guardian of those freedoms on the world stage. Obama said that “no threat is bigger than the American peoples’ capacity to meet it, and no

opportunity exceeds our reach” (Obama 2010b, p. 52).

7. Conclusion

The rhetoric of imperial righteousness enables Obama to justify actions that may seem incongruous as the US moves from expression to action. America advances itself as the world’s only super power, but demands multinational action in combating global issues. America says it is the world leader in promoting human rights, but solicits international assistance in achieving this goal. America wants democracy and freedom abroad, but only insofar as it benefits the US economically or politically. America seeks to constructively engage but reserves the right to intervene militarily in international affairs. America disclaims imperialism but continues to promote American values and goals. America supports the sovereignty of other nations but threatens to isolate nations that do not adopt American values and goals. While the language of imperial righteousness appears socially responsible, it actually promotes the self-interest of America, euphemistically proclaimed as “enlightened-self interest.”

The NSS frequently highlights the concept of leadership. The premise is a simple one: America leads by example by invoking either past or current instances of leadership, and its partners and allies follow the lead. While that argument provides interesting and inspiring rhetoric, the fallacy constructed in the message is apparent. Obama wants to paint a picture of a future world where multiple nations, acting in concert, achieve the political and economic objectives that the US deems appropriate, just, and worthy. That is a lofty goal for any administration to achieve and Obama does not have a record of success to support that rhetorical aspiration.

Analysis of the NSS indicates that employing the rhetoric of imperial righteousness is a necessary tool to articulate American foreign policy. While Bush and Obama are decidedly different in political philosophy, their utilization of the rhetoric of imperial righteousness demonstrates that this rhetoric is fundamental to American foreign policy in the post-9/11 world. The US still advances democracy and freedom, ensures national security, and upholds American morality. The NSS still discusses the enemy, but Obama’s description of the nature of the enemy includes other threats to American security, such as economic and political threats. The basic argument is still valid. Foreign policy objectives cannot be advanced without creating an enemy to that objective – whether it is economic, political, or environmental. However, the fear that the

enemy creates must be perceived as real and imminent for the strategy to have true rhetorical force.

Finally, we argue that the rhetoric of imperial righteousness adapts to the contemporary global climate. The multiple issues listed as threats to American national security require a paradigm that adapts to international necessity. Imperial righteousness is broad enough to allow inclusion of multiple issues while still being strict in form and function. As the Obama administration works to establish a new era of engagement in which all nations must take responsibility for the world America seeks, we argue that the rhetoric of imperial righteousness continues to define the rhetoric of America's foreign policy.

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